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## ABSTRACT

The impact of divorce upon the children's adaptation has increasingly become a topic of concern in developmental research. This study investigates how specific coping resources (self-efficacy, self-esteem) vary according to age and as a correlate of developmental level in children from divorced and intact homes. Researchers also examined the relationship between family environment characteristics and children's age in both types of homes. Participants included 76 elementary school-age children in Montreal from divorced (N=38) and intact families (N=38). Parents completed a demographic questionnaire and the Family Environment Scale while the children filled out the Harter Self Perception Profile for Children. Results revealed significant within-group differences. A child's age in a divorced family was found to be a meaningful predictor of behavioral self-efficacy and self-esteem. Although youngsters from divorced families revealed more uncontrolled behavior problems than their peers from intact families, older youngsters from divorced homes reported higher levels of behavioral self-efficacy than their younger counterparts: younger children from both groups seemed to exhibit less effective psychological coping resources. These findings suggest that counseling programs consider developmental differences in psychological and social coping resources of elementary-school children, since younger children may be at greater risk of developmental difficulties. Contains 9 references. (RJM)

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**Children's Coping Resources Subsequent to Parental  
Divorce: A Developmental Perspective**

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**Children's Coping Resources Subsequent to Parental  
Divorce: A Developmental Perspective**

**Abstract**

The impact of divorce upon children's adaptation has increasingly become a topic of concern to developmental researchers. This study investigates how specific coping resources (self-efficacy, self-esteem) vary as a function of age, a correlate of developmental level, in children from divorced and intact homes. The relationship between family environment characteristics and children's age in divorced and intact homes was comparatively examined as well. Elementary school-age children from divorced ( $n=38$ ) and intact families ( $n=38$ ) were participants. Univariate analyses revealed specific developmental trends, with older children from divorced homes reporting higher levels of behavioral self efficacy than their younger counterparts.

### **Children's Coping Resources Subsequent to Parental Divorce: A Developmental Perspective**

The structure of the North American family has undergone significant changes in the past three decades. The incidence of families involved in marital dissolution remains at record levels, with an estimated 70 percent of all divorces involving children (Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1988). Approximately 45 percent of children born since 1970 will experience an average of six childhood years in a single parent home, usually headed by the mother, as a consequence of divorce (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989).

Concomitant with these statistics, the impact of divorce upon the family system has increasingly become a topic of concern in developmental research. Three consistent findings have been documented in two seminal longitudinal studies of the effects of divorce upon children (Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington Stanley-Hagan & Anderson, 1989; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). First, all children invariably experience acute effects in postdivorce adjustment. Second, the exact nature and course of coping during the postdivorce period varies according to a number of salient personal characteristics. Third, over one-third of children who have experienced parental divorce experience a long term impact, with childhood depression and behavioral disorders being the most frequent clinical diagnoses.

Many deleterious effects on children have been documented in response to family transition, especially when high interparental conflict is involved (Kurtz & Derevensky, in press). Children faced with the ordeal of parental discord and family break up face new and unexpected obstacles. Changes in parent-child relationships are the most frequently identified transformation in response to the disorganization and multitude of family changes resulting from parental divorce (Anderson, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1989). Moreover, the research indicates that children affected by divorce have an increased likelihood of behavior

problems (Hetherington, 1992). It is believed that children at different developmental levels vary in their coping strategies and specific social and cognitive competencies. As a result, coping during the postdivorce period may be characterized as a qualitatively distinct experience for the individual child, in that each developmental level has its characteristic psychological and social coping resource variables (Tarabulsky & Derevensky, 1990).

In fact, the literature on children's coping can be conceptualized within Lazarus and Folkman's stress-coping theoretical framework. The purpose of this research is to investigate how specific psychological coping resources vary as a function of age, a correlate of developmental level, in children from divorced and intact homes. Specifically, how children's self-efficacy and self-esteem are influenced by developmental level during the postdivorce period is of interest. The relationship between family environment characteristics and children's age in divorced and intact homes is comparatively examined as well.

### **Method**

#### **Subjects**

Seventy-six elementary school-age children were selected and volunteered from the Montreal area using a stratified sampling technique. Half of the participants were from families that had experienced divorce (D group) and the remaining half were from intact families (I group). Both groups consisted of 18 boys and twenty girls, ranging from age six to 12 years (average age= nine). The D group had been divorced for an average of four years.

#### **Measures**

1. The Family Environment Scale [FES] (Moos & Moos, 1986).
2. Harter Self Perception Profile For Children [HSPP] (Harter, 1985).
3. Demographic data on family members.

#### **Design and Procedure**

This study took place in the context of a larger study on family processes. Parents were requested to complete a demographic questionnaire and

the FES. Children were administered the HSPP in groups of ten during school hours.

### Results

This investigation employed a multiple regression model and other univariate statistics, exploring age and sex as independent variables. That is, the objective was to explore the effects of age and sex on self referent thought (self-efficacy and self-esteem) and the family social climate in youngsters from divorced and intact families. Between groups differences were observed in a previous study (Kurtz & Derevensky, in press) that found diminished academic self-efficacy in children of divorce and lower levels of social support offered within the social climate of divorced homes. Significant within-group relationships were found.

*In the D group*, all pertinent variables showed nonsignificance when D children were grouped by sex. In terms of self referent thought, children's age was found to be a significant predictor of behavioral self-efficacy and self-esteem [ $F(5,28)=6.38$ ,  $p<.05$  and  $F(5,28)=5.40$ ,  $p<.05$ , respectively]. Moreover, D children's age significantly determined scores on the FES Control subscale [ $F(7,30)=4.73$ ,  $p<.05$ ]. *For the I group*, children's age significantly predicted their perceived social and behavioral self-efficacy [ $F(5,29)=7.92$ ,  $p<.01$  and  $F(5,29)=4.60$ ,  $p<.05$ ]. With regard to family environment factors, children's age was found to be a significant predictor of the FES Intellectual-Cultural Orientation and Expressiveness subscales [ $F(7,30)=5.33$ ,  $p<.05$  and  $F(16,18)=9.8$ ,  $p<.01$ , respectively]. No sex differences were noted.

### Discussion

Although they tend to have more undercontrolled behavior problems than their peers from intact families (Kurtz, Tarabulsky, Derevensky, & Lo, 1992), older youngsters from divorced homes reported higher levels of behavioral self efficacy than their younger counterparts. It is not discernable whether these statistical significant differences are clinically meaningful at this point in time, as replication and extension studies assessing the impact of children's behavioral self-

efficacy on divorce outcomes are needed. Nevertheless, younger children seem to exhibit less effective psychological coping resources. An inverse relationship between parental control and children's age was also observed in this group. This relationship was not significant in the intact family environment. Anderson et al. (1989) observed that as children in divorced families reached pubertal status, control decreased to the point that more positive parent-child relationships were yielded as children matured, especially in boys. Conversely, an analysis of age revealed increasing tension and control in nondivorced families as children matured. The parent-child relationship is an important social coping resource variable that may influence adaptation at home at school.

The stress-coping model is a coherent framework within which basic and applied research can be simultaneously integrated, thus providing important clarification to the overall scope of literature on children of divorce. A second benefit of integrating the outcome data within this established construct is to provide a organizational model for future research in counselling. Researchers and practitioners have expressed the need for intervention studies with children undergoing family transition (Gwynn & Brantley, 1987). Children must learn to identify their emotions in order to adapt to the stressful life event of parental divorce. Group interventions provide a supportive and caring environment in which they can express their reactions to divorce and learn to lower their anxiety (Kalter & associates, 1995; Kurdek & Berg, 1987; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1987; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985). When children's anxiety has diminished, they can begin to verbalize their thoughts and fears more openly, and learn to use more adaptive coping strategies (Strayhorn & Strain, 1986). After school groups become an effective, cost-efficient means of enhancing positive divorce outcomes. The results suggest that counselling programs consider developmental differences in psychological and social coping resources of elementary school children, in that younger children may be at greater risk of

developmental difficulties and families with older children may require interventions that aim to enhance parent-child relationships. Lastly, the study of children's adaptation during family transition provides a natural setting to observe coping and develop school-based counselling programs.

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